UNITED
NATIONS

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Economic and Social
Council

Distr.
GENERAL

E/CN.4/2000/NGO/44
1 February 2000

Original: ENGLISH

COMMISSION ON HUMAN RIGHTS
Fifty-sixth session
Item 9 of the provisional agenda

QUESTION OF THE VIOLATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS AND FUNDAMENTAL FREEDOMS IN ANY PART OF THE WORLD

Written statement submitted by Pax Christi International, International Catholic Peace Movement, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[30 December 1999]

GE.00-10540 (E)

Economic, social and cultural rights: the militarization of Puerto Rico

1. Pax Christi International opposes the United States military exercises on the island of Vieques, Puerto Rico. By the following appeal, Pax Christi International calls on the Government of the United States to cease immediately military exercises on their island because of the harmful effects on the island's inhabitants and ecosystem.

2. On a training mission over the island of Vieques on 19 April 1999, a United States Navy FA-18 off the aircraft carrier John F. Kennedy missed its intended target, and instead dropped live ammunition on an observation post. This accident resulted in the death of a civilian employee and the wounding of several others. That was not the first time that an accident had occurred during naval training exercises, resulting in injury or seriously endangering the lives of the residents of Vieques. In August 1941 the United States Congress approved public law 247 which gave the United States Navy immediate possession of land on Vieques to build a base. At that time the island's population was 14,000. When the military moved in, they took over a total of 26,000 of the island's 33,000 acres. Thousands of people were forced off the land their families had farmed for centuries - often with only 24 hours' warning. Large landowners were paid a lump sum, but over 800 families who had no legal claim to the land where they lived were given a pittance in compensation. Since that time, the United States military base, Camp Garcia, has occupied the eastern portion of the island and the naval ammunition facility occupies the western portion. Both are off-limits and exclusively reserved for the use of the United States Navy.

3. The people of Vieques seek justice for the environment and for themselves, which can only be achieved by the immediate and permanent cancellation of all Navy warfare exercises and operations on the island. The Vieques situation is a blatant violation of human rights. Two thirds of the small island of Vieques has been confiscated by the Navy for reasons of "public interest and national security", which for six decades has actually resulted in underdevelopment and a diminished quality of life for this community. Vieques is not indispensable, by any standards, to the Navy, or to the national security of the United States; it is only indispensable to the well-being of the people of Vieques.

4. Vieques is located six miles southeast of Puerto Rico and has a population of approximately 9,000, of whom 72 per cent live below the poverty level. The municipal government of Vieques reports over 50 per cent unemployment. Studies by the University of Puerto Rico School of Public Health indicate that Vieques suffers a cancer rate 27 per cent higher than the rest of Puerto Rico. The Legislature of Puerto Rico approved legislation ordering an epidemiological study to determine the causes of the higher cancer rate. The people of Vieques relate the abnormally high cancer rate to the environmental degradation caused by the United States Navy and NATO bombardment. This has been confirmed by environmental and health experts throughout Puerto Rico.

5. In 1980, the United States Congress carried out a series of public hearings to investigate the Navy's activities on the island and delivered its opinion that the Navy should abandon the island of Vieques and look for another place to carry out its manoeuvres. In a clear contradiction to these congressional conclusions and recommendations, nearly two decades later the Navy

continues to bombard and pollute the island, ruining the ecology, archaeological sites, and seriously affecting the safety and health of its residents. Following widespread protests by local residents,[1] on 4 December 1999 United States President Bill Clinton ordered the gradual withdrawal of United States forces over five years.

6. Pax Christi International calls on the Government of the United States to stop immediately all warfare and military exercises, manoeuvres and operations. After nearly six decades of "hosting" the United States Navy, the island and its people have had enough. Vieques should be inspected and cleansed of all hazardous chemicals, explosives and live ammunition and the United States Government should compensate the people of Vieques for all their years of suffering.

7. Following this a full environmental evaluation must be conducted on the island of Vieques by the Environmental Protection Agency and representatives of the Government of Puerto Rico. In addition to this a series of studies should be performed by the corresponding federal agencies, in coordination with representatives of the Government of Puerto Rico, to comprehensively evaluate the health, social, cultural and economic conditions of the people of Vieques and delineate viable programmes to improve them. Finally, a federally funded socio-economic and environmental restoration programme must be implemented.

8. When these requirements are met, the United States Government can, in good faith, return the long-occupied land of Vieques to the Government of Puerto Rico; however, this process must start now. In five years' time it will be too late to save this island from permanent damage to its ecosystem and its inhabitants.

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[1] According to the results of a poll released on 24 August 1999, 73 per cent of Puerto Ricans want the United States Navy to vacate the island municipality of Vieques and another 44 per cent oppose the presence of the United States Southern Command in Puerto Rico. For the survey, 1,000 adults around the island, Vieques and Culebra excluded, were polled by the El Nuevo Dia newspaper between 24 July and 11 August 1999.